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To Avoid Student Turnover, Parents Get Rent Help

By ERIK ECKHOLM

FLINT, Mich. — Because he has moved so often, 9-year-old Richard Kennedy has already attended four different schools in Flint. In his mother's latest rental house the other day, he described how it felt to enter an unfamiliar classroom.

"My mind gets mixed up," he said softly. "They're always starting with different stuff than what I know."

He could only nod, tears welling up, when asked if it was hard to make new friends.

The frequent dislocations may help explain why he is being held back in the fourth grade, and why his 11-year-old sister, who has attended eight different schools, can barely read. No one doubts that the constant turnover of students here is taking a huge educational toll on those who move too much and, less obviously, those who stay put, too.

In some of Flint's elementary schools, half or more of the students change in the course of a school year — in one school it reached 75 percent in 2003. The moves are usually linked to low, unstable incomes, inadequate housing and chaotic lives, and the recent rash of foreclosures on landlords is adding to the problem, forcing renters from their homes. The resulting classroom turmoil led the State Department of Human Services to start an unusual experiment, paying some parents $100 a month in rent subsidies to help them stay put — a rare effort to address the damaging turnover directly.

Such house-hopping, and school disruption, is common in low-income urban areas across the country, with annual turnover of students typically ranging from 30 percent to 50 percent, said David Kerbow, an education researcher at the University of Chicago who has studied student mobility, a problem sometimes overlooked by education planners.

As the federal government demands more accountability from schools, high turnover is increasingly recognized as a threat to education and has been a source of concern in districts from Baltimore to Denver. In New York, board of education officials said that while they did not have data on trends in student mobility, it had been a prime reason behind efforts to standardize curriculums, so students switching schools would not find their math classes, for example, far out of sync.

High turnover can undermine a multiyear improvement plan. "It becomes a different school, because the core of the students you're educating has changed," Dr. Kerbow said.

Even the students who do not switch schools suffer, because teachers must spend more time reviewing

materials for newcomers and tend to introduce less material, Dr. Kerbow said, citing what his research had found in Chicago. “The learning trajectory over time is flattened,” he added.

Some of the changes in Flint reflect the district’s loss of 1,000 students a year as parents move out in search of work. But most involve families cycling through homes within the city. Children switch from school to school, even returning repeatedly to the same one, as their parents become overextended on rent in one place, try another rental, flee an unsafe block or move in with a relative or a new partner.

Flint has yawning concrete fields where auto factories once stood. Between the mass loss of factory jobs and middle-class flight, many streets are left with rental houses in various states of disrepair, punctuated by boarded-up houses.

Officials here, as throughout the reeling auto belt, acknowledge that higher education is the key to a new economy. But the churning of students in the early grades imperils their ability to complete high school, let alone college.

Linda Thompson, Flint’s schools superintendent, said that when she was a principal a few years ago at Washington Elementary School, 300 of the 500 students changed in a single year. In response, Ms. Thompson has made it a priority to align the curriculum at all the district’s schools more closely.

To fight the residential turmoil in two of the most afflicted schools, Washington and Bryant, the State Department of Human Services began an experiment in 2004 called the Genesee Scholars Program intended to keep a group of second graders intact for two years. Since the program began, two groups of about 40 families have participated, one in 2004 and the other in 2006; officials said they knew of no other program like it.

The central attraction is the $100-a-month rent subsidy, which is paid directly to landlords, who in turn agree not to raise rents and to keep the houses up to code. The money comes from state agencies.

Perhaps equally important, the students remain with the same teacher and the same classmates for second and third grade.

The families also benefit from a popular state offering in which two caseworkers are assigned to each selected school in what is known as a family resource center. These centers offer a convenient, friendly alternative to large, impersonal offices where parents can arrange for social services like food stamps.

Results from the 2004 group showed that participants in the rent-subsidy program moved less, and the third graders scored significantly higher on a statewide test. The 2006 phase of the program has just been completed, and the results are being evaluated. Officials hope that with more data, they can raise money to expand the program.

The program is popular with parents, and not just for the money. Sinceria Williams, 27, and her partner of 11 years, Marcus Turner, 37, had been living with their six children, ages 3 through 11, in a substandard house

that was an unreliable bus ride from Bryant Elementary School.

When they signed up their son Marcus Jr., 9 and finishing third grade, officials helped them find a nicer house within walking distance of the school.

“The extra hundred dollars was how we could afford this house,” said Mr. Turner, who has worked in construction but is now laid up with gout. The family has been living on the Social Security survivor benefits from his dead father and food stamps.

With the extra money, he added, “we were also able to save up a little for a wedding,” which the couple plans for August.

Ms. Williams, who plans to resume work this fall in a day care center, said the classroom continuity, and the sense of being in a special group, had made a big difference for her son, who no longer looked for excuses to stay home from school and whose grades had climbed.

Richard Kennedy, the struggling fourth grader who has attended four schools, did not arrive at his latest in time to enter the scholars program.

His mother, Jennifer Burnash, 30, has filled her living room with photos of Richard and his sister and their framed school certificates for citizenship and attendance. They live on her monthly disability check of $637, utility aid, cash assistance for the children, $247 a month in food stamps and the money her boyfriend makes doing odd jobs for their landlord.

They have been in their home for more than a year now, but in the last decade, she said, “I’ve moved so many times that I’ve lost track.”

At one point, they fled after a house was shot up by gang members angry with her brother. She tried living in Indianapolis but gave up after three months because the rent was too high. Even in Flint, where houses are available for $300 to $600 a month, “rent is the main thing that hurts you,” Ms. Burnash said.

As for Richard, he tried moving in with his father, but it did not work out.

“I plan on staying here,” Ms. Burnash said, despite the crumbling ceilings. “I love this home.”

There are signs that she means to stay this time. She and her boyfriend have planted grass in a corner of the barren backyard, and they plan to expand it into a lawn, one section at a time.